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for SUNDAY AUSTRALIAN 11/4/71 ATTENTION MR. EVAN WILLIAMS

MYSTERY SHROUDS OUR NATIONAL GALLERY

The time has come, I think, for the Australian public to ask, quietly but firmly, what in heaven's name has happened to its National Gallery?

It seems that a fine building design, approved by all relevant authorities, and needed to house a great, growing collection of paintings now mouldering in cellars, has struck political trouble.

It has run headlong into one of those invisible, resilient, but impenetrable walls that abound along Canberra's twisting corridors of power.

A Kafkaesque air of surrealist frustration, of elusive, evasive opposition, still surrounds the non-appointment of the man recommended as director of this gallery, Laurie Thomas. Now, with a silence fallen over the gallery building itself, the <sup>anti</sup> ~~non~~-plot thins.

If I may remind you of the earlier history, action on the long-discussed National Gallery began in January, 1968. All seemed sunny and straightforward when the Government approved the holding of an architectural competition for the gallery building.

This National Gallery was to be one of our great national monuments, one of the few select buildings permitted in sight of Parliament House. The site selected was tentative, behind temporary Parliament House, but that perturbed no-one. The competition, like nearly all architectural competitions, was to select an architect and an approach to the problem rather than a firm design for a building.

It was not an open competition. Twelve men or firms known for their creative design and capacity were selected by the National Capital Development Commission and invited to enter. Their drawings were exhibited anonymously before the judges who, after two days, selected one design. The envelope which held the author's name was slit open in July 1968 by Mr. John Gorton, and the winner's name was announced. It was the firm of Edwards, Madigan and Torzillo, Sydney architects with a long record of imaginative rather than enormous works. Colin Madigan was the partner responsible in this case.

Pity the lucky winner of an architectural competition for a public building in Australia! The trail ahead of him is littered with the broken dreams of Griffin, Utzon, the young group which won the Melbourne Olympic Pools prize, and many more. Yet each time when the prize is won and the champagne is still flowing everyone feels it will be different this time. Col Madigan was fairly ecstatic in those days.

I have a more than general interest in the affair because I happened to be one of the judges of the competition. The other two were Sir John Overall, Commissioner of the N. C. D. C., and J. H. McConnell, then President of the R. A. I. A.. We were unanimous in our selection of the design, and it had stiff competition from the other entries.

It had imagination and elan, offering fine hanging-spaces inside and a long, horizontally-stressed exterior. It was nothing like any building yet built in the capital, and promised a new Freedom.

The first cloud came when Parliament voted in May, 1969, to change the site of permanent Parliament House from the lakeside to the place which had been tentatively allocated to the gallery. The architect marked time while a new site for the gallery went through the long process of selection and examination; but eventually all that was done. A new site was approved by cabinet just a year ago; and it is a splendid one; near the lake, across the enormous lawn from the National Library.

Now the architect again had some ground to work on, but he needed a client — a gallery director to instruct him on detailed requirements. That was the main reason that a director was sought so soon (but the Laurie Thomas story does not bear retelling here). However, a fine substitute for a permanent director was found in James Sweeney, American professional gallery director of great experience, charm and frankness. He made several visits here, spending altogether hours over the plans with Col Madigan. He watched at intervals over many months as a completely revised scheme took shape in response to his sympathetic suggestions.

Finally the two men had a design which satisfied both. Sweeney is a perfectionist and not a man to drop praise lightly. He has expressed his confidence in and enthusiasm for the new design several times, publicly and privately. Madigan, who has now lived with this gallery on paper for more than two years, has the satisfaction of a craftsman who has polished off all the roughnesses and unnecessary contrivances and holds at last what looks like a pure idea.

It has a powerful, white, faceted form, big blocks suspended high on massive pylons, glass-screen walls rather than windows. All a little alarming at first sight perhaps to anyone conditioned by Canberra's Neo-Classicism. It is uncompromisingly original, having grown outwards from an internal flow path for visitors through great bland spaces in which nothing will count but the paintings and sculptures. It is a mature design. It is all gallery; potentially one of the great galleries of the world.

When this design took final shape last year many others apart from the architect and the substitute director were delighted. The design was approved with enthusiasm by the relevant statutory bodies; the Gallery Interim Council, the National Capital Planning Committee, and the National Capital Development Commission. It seemed certain that the National Art Collection, built up over years and now stacked in thousands of pieces in storerooms, would relatively soon be brought to public light.



And that was the point when the scheme ran smack, or plop, into that invisible barrier in some twist of a Canberra corridor of power. Since then: no announcements, no statements. Only the usual rumours.

If it is any consolation to Col Madigan, this sort of treatment happens only to unusually good buildings in Australia.

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